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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a new approach designed to help students understand the concepts around which introductory social and political science courses are typically built. The social science course, "Problem Solving in Society," includes an exercise requiring the class as a whole to select, and develop proposals to alleviate, a social problem. Students also organize the class for the research and analytic tasks required to fulfill their assignment, determine what work they will do, decide how decisions will be made, and keep individual journals that provide the data on which required weekly analytic papers are based. Instructors serve as observers of group activity, consultants on substantive and procedural matters, and evaluators of papers and journals. This participatory power-sharing approach enables students to deal personally with a specific social problem and to create a mini-social system which exhibits many characteristics of contemporary society. Several skills and orientations are highlighted in a participatory course, including ability to articulate views in group settings, development of a sense of efficacy, and tolerance for the conflict which ensues from group decision making. It is suggested that educators should consider the educational value of student participation in developing and implementing curriculum. (Author/DB)

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PARTICIPATION AND EDUCATION: POWER SHARING IN THE CLASSROOM

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PARTICIPATION AND EDUCATION: POWER SHARING IN THE CLASSROOM*

INTRODUCTION

Participatory democracy has long been a research interest in political science. Projects have been designed and findings published that support the contentions of those who cite the "educational" benefits of participation. And those concerned about political science education, looking for ways to involve and excite students, have increasingly adopted such "participatory" exercises as role playing or classroom simulations. Yet these and other forms of experiential education frequently seem appended rather than integrated into the course offerings.

To provide a more fully integrated participatory experience, an interdisciplinary team representing DePaul University's political science and sociology departments, working within the framework of the university's general education program,[1] developed an introductory social science course built around a participatory power sharing model. Student experiences in the classroom and a problem solving focus are used both to add depth to the understanding of concepts around which introductory sociology and political science courses are typically built and to provide opportunities for the identification and the development of the analytic, communication and interpersonal skills needed to function effectively in the society the students are studying.

After five years of experimentation, including much trial and error, we are ready to report on what seems to us to be viable, interesting and important about student participation in the classroom at DePaul.

Such a report is timely because our experiences, confirming both the claims of participatory theorists and the findings of other studies of participation, are particularly relevant to challenges facing educators in colleges and universities today.

HIGHER EDUCATION IN A CHANGING SOCIETY

The academic community is increasingly confronted by career-oriented students who, facing a problematic job market, are demanding courses and programs that are overtly relevant to their career aspirations. The increasing enrollment in pre-professional programs and concomitant decline in the liberal arts is just one reflection of that demand.

Two forces at work in society, however, make it more difficult than ever for colleges to satisfactorily meet these demands. The tight job market might easily put educators in the position of providing training for careers which may be unavailable when students are ready. The rapidity of social change suggests that when one trains students with a narrow focus for specialized tasks, the skills developed might well be dysfunctional when students emerge from the university to enter a specific career.

"Whatever competence means today," states Harvard Professor of Education and Organization Behavior Chris Argyris, "we can be sure its meaning will have changed tomorrow. The foundation for future professional competence seems to be the capacity to learn how to learn."[2] And pointing out that contemporary students need most to know how to cope with the unknown, Olton and Crutchfiled argue that they must be prepared for a world in which their ability to function will not depend

trates the relevance of the social and political sciences, and fosters the kinds of competencies identified by Argyris and Bok.

PARTICIPATION IN THE CLASSROOM AT DEPAUL

"Problem Solving in Society," was initially developed as an introduction to society, designed to stimulate student interest in the social sciences and add affective depth to their understanding of the concepts of power, authority, legitimacy and others typically presented in the introductory course. The course deviates from the traditional approach in two ways. First, rather than introducing students directly to the various components of a social system and to the concepts used to explain the operation of society, the course requires students to study a single social problem. We have found that when students seriously explore a social problem, they invariably come into contact with those components of society typically dealt with in the introductory text. The more significant course deviation, however, is in the organization of the class. The instructor, rather than maintaining his/her usual authoritative stance, shares power and authority with the students.

"Problem Solving in Society" works in the following way. The syllabus informs students that their tasks are to: 1) reach consensus on a social problem which the class as a whole will investigate; 2) organize to do the required research and analytical tasks; and 3) develop, as a group, a set of proposals to remedy the problem they have identified. Students are given the power to determine what work they will do, how they organize themselves to do the work, and how decisions are to be made.

Students in this class have the opportunity to see society from two perspectives. First, they make contact with the major components of American society as they investigate, analyze, and search for solutions to a particular social problem. And second, as the class organizes itself around the problem solving task, the students are, in effect, forming a social system of their own which exhibits the major characteristics usually described in the text books.

The course is divided into three time blocks. The first is devoted to orienting students to the problem solving approach and the participatory model of society and classroom in which they will function. During this period, instructors lead the class through various structured experiences designed to identify the skills needed in the problem solving activity. Among these are exercises in active listening, brainstorming, participant observation and small and large group interaction. The second and major time block is devoted to the problem solving activity, and the third block is spent analyzing the classroom experience and student research in an effort to put together a portrait of a social system based on shared experiences and information. Discussions and readings on such topics as social and political structures, and social and political processes are related to concrete experiences students have shared and thus add an affective and concrete dimension to concepts usually presented in purely cognitive abstract terms.

During the problem solving exercise, students record all activities and research findings in individual journals that provide the data on which required weekly analytic papers are based. The papers focus on both the substantive material relevant to the social problem students

are investigating and the activities taking place in the classroom. In taking on the role of participant observers, students develop an increasing sensitivity to their environment as they learn about a social system while they are creating it.

The journals along with the analytic papers become a major resource for the class and serve as textbooks around which much of the discussion and analysis evolves. In addition, the weekly deadline for the paper serves as a built-in substitute for the demands usually imposed by classroom assignments and provides some structure for the classroom situation. The papers also serve as vehicles enabling instructors to help students develop analytic and writing skills and as a means of maintaining open communication channels between each student and the instructor.

Although they maintain their traditional stance during the first and third time block in this course, instructors step down from that authoritative position during the problem solving exercise and serve as facilitators. A problem solving manual provides specific and detailed guidelines for the research, organizational, and analytic tasks required.[7] When additional help is needed, instructors are available to respond to all requests on procedural as well as substantive questions. They do not, however, direct student activities or impose their ideas when they are not solicited.

Although they have relinquished the leadership role, instructors still find plenty to do. During the problem solving exercise they perform the following functions:

1) As the only non-participant observers of the group, they compile

notes which will be used to illustrate the relevant concepts discussed in the last part of the course;

2) As consultants and facilitators on both substantive and procedural matters, they are available when students need their guidance;

3) As evaluators of the papers and the journals, they guide student's development of writing, analytic, and participant observer skills; and

4) As commentators, they share the perspectives of the outside observer as well as the insights contained in student papers. Instructors at DePaul have found it useful to reserve one half hour of class time each week for their input.

Every class, of course, is unique and to a large degree what transpires in the classroom is dependent on the particular mix of student personalities and interests. However, our experience with this course has enabled us to predict with reasonable certainty that the following pattern of events will take place during the problem solving activity.

Selecting the Problem.

This is probably the most difficult and frustrating part of the exercise because it is the beginning of a new venture and none of the students quite knows what to do. On the class day when the activity begins the intsructors[8] take a seat anywhere in the room. The class now belongs to the students.

There are initially some confused and awkward moments until someone sufficiently courageous takes the leadership role and directs the group discussion. We have had classes where students sat in an uncomfortable silence for twenty minutes and others where it took less than five to get started.

The initial discussions frequently veer between long, uncomfortable silences and a large number of ideas thrown out in a rather uncoordinated fashion. This turns out to be primarily a brainstorming session, but because the group is large, it is usually difficult for the self-appointed leader to control.[9]

The problem selection phase frequently takes one or two weeks, and although each class handles the difficulties in different ways, several problems invariably arise. Leadership must be selected. A method of organizing ideas must be devised. And, some decision-making rules must be adopted. Sometimes these tasks are consciously performed, and other times, students stumble from one phase to the next without much deliberate consideration being given to the process.

The problem selection phase is usually characterized by a great deal of anger and frustration. There is frustration with the time involved in reaching consensus on anything. There is anger with students who appear unwilling to compromise. There is the frustration inherent in a situation in which a large number of people are anxious to reach a decision quickly and an equally large number opt for more careful consideration and lengthy deliberation. There is the discomfort of learning by doing a novel task in a new environment. And finally, there is the anger leveled at the instructors who created this uncomfortable situation.

Eventually, however, recognizing the time constraints imposed by deadlines in the syllabus, the students make their choice and their sense of accomplishment is all the more treasured having

followed hours of conflict, argument and searching. Not everyone is happy with the final decision, but the implications of decision making by majority rule are clearly illustrated. And the shared experience in large group decision making has engendered a real sense of group identity which includes both the satisfied and the disaffected.

Researching and Analyzing the Problem.

This phase presents a whole new series of challenges to the students. They must learn enough about the area they have chosen to investigate to identify the problem and break it into manageable parts around which the research assignments can be constructed. And they must do these assignments, not because an instructor has so dictated, but because they recognize that the task demands it.

In many instances the initial research period is characterized by large scale lethargy. Most students do not readily adapt to the changes in the classroom culture and they give a low priority to work which is neither required by an instructor nor has a grade directly attached. The "Iron Law of Oligarchy" quickly manifests itself as the leadership -- those who do feel a sense of responsibility -- take on a major share of the work. This is counteracted, however, by peer presure as new roles and relationships follow the typical formation of small groups. There is also a growing involvement in the project with the increasing adaptation to the culture of the participatory classroom.

Intergroup Communication.

After each group collects its data on the subject, a new challenge

arises. In one way or another the class must pull together the research findings and analyses. Students meet this problem in a variety of ways -- steering committees, large group meetings, etc. In any case, the advantages and disadvantages of both representative systems and direct democracy are explored. Somehow the students manage to pool both their information and analyses to get it together for the final phase. During this period they often become aware of the ethnocentrism developed in their small groups and the concomitant problems arising in their relations with members in the others. Their allegiances aud loyalties change and they must frequently look for some way to retain that sense of membership originally developed for the class as a whole.

Developing the Proposal.

Students have devised a variety of ways to deal with this task. What they all have in common is a very real sense of urgency. There is never enough time. Students are later reminded that this experience is typically shared by legislators attempting to complete their workload near the end of the session. Never has time as a resource been more fully appreciated.

The drama heightens as the proposal day draws closer. Sometimes each small group develops proposals related to their sections. When this happens studencs must frequently work out conflicting proposals and analyses. Sometimes a few students take the collected information and stay up all night writing the proposal. Sometimes decisions, which cannot be accomodated, necessitate the drafting of minority reports.

However it happens, there is a trememdous surge of accomplishment when the task is completed. Even though members of the group may not be completely satisfied with their results, they are proud that they have met the deadline. "If only we could do it again," is often heard. But their work is over and now it is up to the instructor to give dimension to their experience.

We have found that no matter what social problem is selected, student research enables instructors to focus on the many ways in which social and political systems intersect. Students become familiar with the power required to force recognition of a social problem. They begin to recognize the implications of the varying definitions of the problems involved. And they see more clearly the roles of both formal governmental institutions and those extra governmental groups influencing decision makers in the identification, definition and the resolution of social problems. A discussion of resource allocation and power distribution becomes much more meaningful when the organizing principle is a problem in which the students have developed a proprietory interest.

In examining the structure that develops in the classroom, instructors find ample opportunities to illustrate basic concepts. The initial transformation of the class into a problem solving group illustrates several important political processes. Some kind of leadership selection and some rudimentary rule making always occurs as the students look for someone to bring order out of chaos and to keep a record of the discussion that occured and the decisions that were

made. Furthermore, the discussions on the method used to determine which problem is selected makes for instructuve analyses of the consequences of different voting procedures and varying definitions of majority.

The research and analysis phase of the problem solving activity requires further organizational changes in the classroom. Inevitably students form smaller task oriented groups which exhibit the characteristics of rudimentary institutions. In addition to the further role differentiation and rule making that takes place, problems of inter and intra-group communication as well as other impacts of organizational structure on individual and group behavior are illustrated. Finally, instructors will find many occasions on which students act out the basic concepts to be learned. Students taking leadership positions get a dramatic illustration of the concept of legitimacy when the rest of the class fails to cooperate. Those who find themselves engaged in activities to which they were initially opposed, begin to understand the meaning of power. And those who are able, either by carefully reasoned exposition or by charismatic appeals, to sway the group in their direction begin to see the variable qualities of effective leadership.

The number of readings used to illuminate classroom experiences as well as the quality one can demand in student research is to a large extent dependent on the time available for the course. At DePaul, where courses run over a nine or ten week quarter, we find it most productive to focus our attention on the social system developed in

the classroom.[10] A semester course would allow for more thorough research and more extensive supplementary readings.

Participatory Skills and Orientations.

The participatory problem solving format was initially developed to give students an in depth meaningful introduction to those concepts used by political scientists and sociologists in their examinations and analyses of social and political systems. We have found, however, that the environment we have created and the activities pursued by the students to meet the course requirements, have produced additional payoffs. Students have made a beginning at appreciating the necessity for developing those skills and attitudes necessary to function effectively in a variety of group settings. And they begin to develop those skills. Although a focus on such individual competencies is not usually found in political and other social science courses, students of organizational behavior have for some time recognized both the value of these competencies and the need for developing them in an environment where the responsibility is placed on the learner rather than the educator.[11]

The skills and orientations most frequently highlighted in this course have been: 1) the ability to articulate one's views in both small and large group settings; 2) a tolerance for the conflict, ambiguity and delay which naturally follows when many make the decisions previously made by a few; 3) a willingness to take risks; 4) a recognition of the interpersonal skills required to enable groups of individuals to work cooperatively on a common task; and 5) the development of a sense of efficacy that comes in part from the class ex-

perience which illustrates to all students that they have something to offer and that what they do and think is important to the class as a whole.

We have found that an appreciation for the need to develop such competencies and an understanding of some of the basic tenets of organizational behavior both prepares students to function more effectively in any organizational setting and enhances their understanding of the social and political systems they are examining. Students begin to realize that the institutions, which frequently become reified when they are studied as abstractions, are in reality groups of people working within the context of specific rules and organizational structures. Thus it becomes important not only to know about the rules and organizational structures, but also about the human reactions of those who must work within them.

PARTICIPATION AND INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT

Our experiences with the problem solving course have convinced us that we can derive significant educational payoffs by increasing students' participation in the classroom and sharing power with them. The involvement and interest generated by the situation is of a particular value in an introductory course where the interest level is usually low. The use of a social problem and the social system in the classroom as organizing principles around which the course is built, offers students a much more meaningful multi-dimensional view of the concepts and processes they are studying. And finally, the activities required of the students and the responsibilities imposed on them, speak to the educational needs addressed by Bok, Argyris and others who call

for an education that focuses on communication skills, on creative thinking, and on the development of the capacity to learn how to learn.

The main justifying function of participation, according to Kaufmann, has always been the contribution it can make to the development of human powers of thought, action and feeling.[12] A brief review of studies of participation in other settings provides some support for Kaurmann's argument. And a brief examination of the results of a preliminary analysis of the impact of the participatory experience on the students in the problem solving class indicates that these benefits may also be available when participation and power sharing are incorporated into a college classroom setting.

Participation provides both education and fulfillment for the individual in several ways. Acting with others to solve common problems, theorists claim, instills a desire for knowledge, helps individuals recognize their own interests; fosters understanding and empathy for those of others; creates and reveals common interests; and fosters the development of both empahty and a sense of efficacy. Such experience in collaboration, furthermore, provides valuable insights into the nature of society and the individual relationships within the system.

A European study of political participation, reporting that active participants exhibited both an increase in the desire for and in the acquisition of knowledge, provides some support for the argument that participation enhances learning.[13] Several studies report that participation leads to both an increase in efficacy and tolerance. Pateman's

survey of research on industrial democracy, for example, found that workers who share decision making power develop a sense of personal worth, a sense of responsibility, and a sense of political efficacy.[14] And research on a South Carolina poverty program illustrates the development of tolerance and empathy in its racially integrated clientele. Both black and white citizens reported that their participation in the program improved communication between the races.[15] Communication skills are also more readily developed in an environment when a need for effective communication is clear. The South Carolina study showed that although the members of the poverty clientele group participating in the community action programs were inarticulate at first, their experiences taught them to be more expressive and effective communicators and more forceful in their participation.[16]

The benefits to individuals cited in these studies are consistent with many goals in higher education. It would, therefore seem appropriate to determine if a participatory classroom can provide similar payoffs for students. We are planning to develop a series of evaluation instruments, not totally dependent on student perceptions, which will allow us to more systematically measure the impact of the participatory environment on student development. However, a small sample of preliminary student surveys and the impressionistic assessment of the instructors teaching the course, suggests that we might well find the same kind of benefits accruing to the students who have participated in the problem solving course.

Instructors in the classes report a higher level of motivation and involvement than is usually found in an introductory course. Ninety

percent of the 115 students in our preliminary survey indicated that their understanding of society was enhanced, but even more important, seventy-one percent felt that their own role in society was clarified.[17] The growth of empathy and tolerance was also illustrated, with seventy-three percent of the respondents claiming that they felt more competent after taking the course and eighty-seven percent reporting that they were able to listen more tolerantly to differing viewpoints.

Although we have not yet developed a measure for communication skills, we do know that students who have worked in a variety of organizational settings where the impact of articulation and persuasion skills are clearly illustrated, develop an appreciation for the need to improve and test their writing and oral communication skills. And we have seen that they are likely to work more vigorously at developing those skills when they are emotionally involved in the situation about which they are writing and speaking and when the stakes for effective communication are clear.

The heightened student interest and involvement reported by instructors in the course appears to stem from the same source as the increased worker interest and motivation reported in the studies of workers' management. When one allows those who must implement decisions to participate in making them, interest and motivation is enhanced. Indeed one study found an increase in job satisfaction directly "proportional to the amount of worker participation."[18]

The organization of our course stimulated student involvement. In-

deed students found it impossible to take a totally passive stance. The initial decision-making in which students must choose the topic around which the course will be built obviously stimulates a great deal of interest. And although the burden of determining the content of the course falls more heavily on some, and consensus is frequently difficult to achieve, all students are forced to involve themselves to some extent and thus are forced to do the kind of creative thinking so easily avoidable in lecture courses.

The organizational tasks of determining leadership roles, group memberships, and assignments, again makes it impossible for any student to completely escape active participation. And when students, as they always do, arrange themselves into small working groups, peer pressure does the job of intensifying motivation to work.

The participatory experience thus generated an almost proprietory feeling about the class and created a novel attitude towards learning. It is not unusual to find students, who feeling that the course is theirs, spend time outside the classroom sharing and exploring experiences with those in other sections. Information is absorbed and analyzed, not because the instructor dictates, but because students are looking for answers to questions which they themselves have formulated.

There are, of course, limits on what can be accomplished in one quarter. Our findings are suggestive at best. However, student responses have encouraged us to proceed both with this course and with the development of other courses which will enable them to build on this initial experience.

Education in a participatory environment is not without its costs, however. Studies of participation point to many of the difficulties we have encountered in our course. Power sharing in decision making increases overt conflict and ambiguity and brings greater discomfort to the individuals involved. There is no denying that the transformation of a collection of individual students led by an authoritative instructor into a collaborative problem solving group guided by a facilitator, brings tensions and strains for all those involved. Mistakes are frequently made, for students must learn to take on responsibilities for which they are unprepared and which they have been socialized not to expect. And instructors must share power and practice restraint, so as not to deprive the students of the opportunity of learning from their mistakes.

However, we have found that the payoffs of enhanced motivation and learning are worth the costs. Out students emerge from this experience with an in depth grasp of the sociological and political science concepts used to analyze social systems and with a real feel for their own role in society.

In his study of Education and the Human Quest, Herbert Thelen argues that by presenting students with pre-defined problems and with courses of studies built around subject matter, we are impeding the development of creativity at a time when society most needs creative decision makers. Students must have the opportunity to define their own problems, for it "is in the formulation of the problem that individuality is expressed, that creativity is stimulated and that nuances and subtleties are discovered."[19] Such creativity can be de-

veloped in a participatory classroom setting.

Our own experience bolstered by the findings in participation studies suggest that when an instructor is willing to adopt a participatory setting, one can both address the problem of student interest, and foster the skills and attitudes required by contemporary society. By permitting students to participate in determining the content of their course, we have allowed them to find out for themselves the value of a social science education. And by creating a situation in which students are dependent on the use of adequate analytic, communication and organizational skills to achieve their goals, we have not only encouraged students to develop those competencies, but we have clearly illustrated their relevance to student life and career aspirations.

One final point. Studies of participation and education suggest that educational institutions in the United States have, for the most part, failed to provide the training required by effective participating citizens. Weissberg concludes in his work on Political Learning, Political Choice, and Democratic Citizenship that "on the whole, the overwhelming evidence...indicates that the range of political alternatives reasonably open to the citizen does not include the dispositions and skills demanded by participatory democracy."[20] If one is to take seriously the arguments and findings documenting the value of increased citizen participation, it becomes necessary to modify educational programs so that the necessary skills and dispositions can be nurtured.

A recent study of higher education noted that when students were asked to name their most important educational experience while in college, they seldom listed an event that took place in the classroom.[21] We feel that a participatory setting will allow us to place significant learning experiences back in the classroom where they rightfully belong.

FOOTNOTES

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1. The general education program administered by DePaul College consists of four interdisciplinary divisions. This course serves as one of the introductory courses for the Behavioral Social Science Division. It was developed by the author and Professor Nancy Klein (Sociology) with the help and encouragement of Dr. William Waters, head of the Division and Dr. Martin Lowery, Dean of DePaul College.

2. Chris Argyris and Donald A. Schon, Theory in Practice, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1974) p. 157.

3. Robert M. Olton and Richard S. Crutchfield, "Developing Skills of Productive Thinking" in Robert F. Biehler, ed. Psychology Applied to Teaching (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), p. 315.

4. Derek Bok, "On the Purposes of Undergraduate Education," Daedalus, Vol. 103, (Fall, 1974) p. 171.

5. Howard S. Becker, "A School is a Lousy Place to Learn Anything In," in Blanche Greer, ed. Learning to Work (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1972)

6. Argyris, op. cit., p. 4.

7. This manual is being incorporated into a larger textbook which includes discussions of basic concepts used in social science. Nancy Klein and Greta Salem, Learning Through Problem Solving: An Introduction To Society. A separate manual for teachers is also being prepared.

8. Although a few sections of this course have been taught by individual instructors, most often it is a team taught course. We have found that faculty venturing into this innovative format find the support system provided by a colleague most helpful.

9. A team taught class usually enrolls about seventy students.

10. We are currently working on the development of a problem solving sequence of courses which will allow us both to introduce more systematic research methodologies and to add to the substantive material introduced in the course.

11. Chris Argyris, "The Nature of Competence - Acquisition Activities and Their Relationship to Therapy," in Warren E. Bennis, David E. Berlew, Edgar H. Schein, Fred I. Stelle, Interpersonal Dynamics (Homewood, Illinois: The Dorsey Press; 1973)

12. Arnold S. Kaufman, "Human Nature and Participatory Democracy," in William E. Connolly, ec., The Bias of Pluralism (New York: Atherton Press; 1969), p. 184.

13. Samuel H. Barnes, "Participation, Education, and Political Competence," American Political Science Review, LX (June, 1969), p. 353.

14. Carole Pateman, Participation and Democratic Theory (Cambridge: At the University Press; 1970) p. 52.

15. Howard Hallman, "The Community Action Program -- An Interpretive Analysis," in Warren Bloomberg, Jr. and Henry Schmandt, Power, Poverty and Urban Policy, (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1968), p. 301.

16. Ibid.

17. Although students might well feel that a traditional introductory course also enhances their understanding, it is less likely that such a course would help them clarify their own role in the social system. We have applied for a grant to study the impact of this approach which will allow us to compare the problem solving students with control groups in the traditional introductory course.

18. Paul Blumberg, Industrial Democracy (New York: Schocken Books, 1969)

19. Herbert Thelen, Education and the Human Quest (New York: Harper and Row, 1960) p. 29.

20. Robert Weissberrg, Political Learning, Political Choice and Democratic Citizenship (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974) p. 182.

21. Harold L. Hodgkinson, "Assessment and Reward Systems" in G. Kerry Smith, ed. New Teaching New Learning (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1971)